

The Lincoln-Douglas Debate in Galesburg: Summary, Influences and Effect on History

Miriam Taour
Oregon High School, Oregon
Teacher: Sara Werckle

In August 1858 two candidates for the position of U. S. Senator of Illinois began a series of debates. These two candidates were Abraham Lincoln, a fairly insignificant man at the time, and Stephen A. Douglas, “the biggest man in Illinois.” In Galesburg, on October 7, 1858, the fifth of these debates was held. The two men argued significant issues of the time, which backed their individual beliefs and had a considerable impact on American history.

There were several important ideas argued in the Lincoln-Douglas Debate held at Galesburg. The first was expansion and those laws governing the new territories. At this point in history the country was rapidly growing and expanding westward. Douglas encouraged growth and did not wish to enforce slavery or anti-slavery practices on these new states. He felt “each State must do as it pleases,” as one historian wrote. Lincoln, however, disagreed. He argued that slavery should be banned in these new states.

The two men also spent much time pointing out inconsistencies in each other’s arguments. Douglas pointed out that Lincoln altered his ideas on slavery depending on whether he was in a pro-slavery or anti-slavery county, and he did not call his party Republican in every county. Lincoln countered by stating that Douglas could not keep the same name for his party in every county either, and brought up Douglas’ use of a fraudulent newspaper article in a former debate for which Douglas had clearly apologized, in one of his former arguments. Lincoln suggested that Douglas may have

conspired with other men to create the article.

Lastly, they debated on how black people should be treated. Lincoln said that although blacks were inferior, they deserved to have the same rights as white men. He said that these rights were protected in the Constitution. Douglas tried to remain neutral on the topic and treated the issue of slavery as one of property, not morality. Douglas believed that the Constitution was made protecting only the rights of white people.

The views held by both Lincoln and Douglas during these debates were greatly influenced by their individual beliefs. Abraham Lincoln believed that black people, although inferior to the white race, should be equal to whites. This influenced his arguments against slavery. He believed that it was immoral and wrong. Douglas did not believe that slavery was immoral and stayed neutral on that issue; however, Douglas “consistently stood for the Union and its expansion,” according to one historian. This explains his belief that each new state had the right to choose whether slavery would be allowed or banned and could make laws in support of or against slavery, just as long as they were people creating new states. This also explains his insistence on westward expansion. In the debate, Douglas pushed the importance of America needing to grow. The individual opinions of Lincoln and Douglas had a strong impact on their views in the debate.

The Galesburg Lincoln-Douglas Debate also influenced American history. The most obvious thing was that it helped Douglas gain enough supporters to win the election and secure the position of Illinois senator. But it also had an influence on Abraham Lincoln’s run for the presidency two years later. The debate helped to spread the ideas of Lincoln and other Republicans, and gained him support for his election to office. The

debate helped Lincoln come from being “a somewhat obscure politician in Illinois” to being “one of the foremost antislavery leaders and popular orators in the United States,” wrote N. Dwight Harris. Evidently, the Galesburg Lincoln-Douglas Debate had considerable effect on American history.

Although the Galesburg Lincoln-Douglas Debate is not the most well known in the series of debates the two men held, it most definitely deserves recognition. The Galesburg Lincoln-Douglas Debate was a discussion of the issues of slavery in new states, inconsistencies in each candidate’s arguments, and how blacks should be treated. Each man’s views strongly influenced American history. Undoubtedly, the debate held in Galesburg was a notable historic event. [From Abraham Lincoln Historical Digitization Project. “Lincoln Biography.” <<http://Lincoln.lib.niu.edu/giointro.html>> (Oct. 10, 2007); Don E. Fehrenbacher, *Abraham Lincoln*; and Dwight N. Harris, *The History of Negro Servitude In Illinois and of the Slavery Agitation in That State*; Robert P. Howard, *Illinois*.]